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ABSTRACT

Much current composition theory depends on the notion that writers represent reality--a situational context, an author, and an audience--in the text itself, and that readers construct their own representations of that text. Business writers, on the other hand, often direct their compositions to specific audiences, the members of which have participated in a shared situational context prior to writing. Since business writing facilitates an encompassing business transaction, business writers and readers--unlike most writers and readers of published prose--actually interact with one another. And because business writing develops from a particular situational context in which both writers and readers participate, it follows that business writers know something more about their audiences than do writers of published works; they can rely on variables in that context to produce meaning in their texts. Moreover, unlike authors of the published texts that are based on the work of composition theorists, business writers rely on personal knowledge of their readers through daily interaction or the exchange of texts. Finally, business writers often work collaboratively, and roles do not need to be fashioned for them or their readers since the situational context defines the text. (HOD)

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The Business Writer's Audience is Rarely a Fiction

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In "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," which won the 1975 William Riley Parker award, Walter J. Ong develops some ideas about writer-reader relationships that recur in the work of a number of current composition theorists:[1]

1. Unlike speech, writing does not depend on a situational context extrinsic to the text for the production of meaning.[2]

2. Writers compose in solitary confinement; writing entails withdrawal from the world and the prospective audience.[3]

3. The writer "has to make up his audience, fictionalize them" (Ong 1975:11).

4. Writers do not fictionalize their readers based on experiences in real life, but work from fictionalized audiences in other texts, whose authors imagined their audiences using earlier texts, ad infinitum.[4]

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5. Readers fictionalize themselves into roles conveniently stipulated by the text. "A reader has to play a role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life" (Ong 1975:12).

Although Ong cites mainly literary evidence--from Hardy, Hemingway, Twain, and Tolkien, for example--E. D. Hirsch credits Ong (and also Chaim Perelman) for his notion that "every linguistic audience is imaginary insofar as the speaker must predict a probable response and a probable understood meaning before he speaks" (1977:28; first emphasis mine). Writers too imaginatively project themselves, creating Boothean implied authors in their texts.[5]

Hirsch compares his account of imaginary audiences and implied authors to Grice's "description of the doubly projective structure of speech acts" (29). But in both its original formulation and its various avatars, Grice's view of meaning and communication depends not on imagination but on the concept of mutual knowledge among discourse participants.[6] This distinction is crucial for the rest of my paper.

Hirsch, it appears, has conflated a literary theoretical account of reading with a philosophical account of linguistic meaning. As a result, he in effect banishes real writers and real readers from texts. Implied authors and imaginary audiences are "semifictional and vague" because "both must be imaginatively experienced rather than directly experienced . . . and . . . because their character must be imaginatively available to a broad and heterogeneous audience" (30). Genre conventions largely determine the implied author's intentions and the imaginary reader's responses. In short, "the absence of actual persons, speaking in actual contexts, requires the creation of implied persons speaking in implied contexts"; this "eccentricity

of written speech" means that composition explicitly needs to be taught (31).

George Dillon (1981) criticizes Hirsch's Philosophy of Composition, especially its psycholinguistic underpinnings.[7] But his own composition theory markedly resembles Hirsch's. Using Basil Bernstein's work (1972), as does Hirsch, and that of David R. Olson (1977), Dillon differentiates between Utterance and Text much as Hirsch distinguishes speaking and writing (Dillon 1981:21ff.; Hirsch 1977:21ff.).

Text "embodies many of the traditional values of the liberal arts education" (Dillon 1981:22); its exemplar, the expository essay, should be taught pretty much exclusively in composition courses (xiii and passim). In contradistinction to practical writing--"personal letters, memos and reports within an organization, articles in special interest journals" (28), the expository essay is extremely unsituated (24), allowing for "the projection by the text of a Model (or Implied) Reader" (xvi). But this "process of imagining a reader is accordingly not an attempt to appropriate the knowledge and viewpoint of actual persons who might peruse the text but of projecting a self that readers will try on and find agreeable" (164-165).[8] Finally, as with Hirsch, conventions define for both writer and reader what can be said in any text-type (xi-xiii).[9] In Dillon as in Hirsch, writers' knowledge of actual readers seems not enter into the composing process.[10]

Referring approvingly to Hirsch's and Olson's dichotomization of Utterance and Text, Flower and Hayes claim that writers contextualize meaning in the text itself by using specialized written discourse conventions. They quote Hirsch's disposition of these conventions into two sets: "conventions of the normative written dialect: and "the stylistic conventions which make it possible to communicate with a large, distant, and diverse readership" (Flower and Hayes 1980b:39). Satisfying these conventions grows even more complicated for writers because they also must meet the demands of the

rhetorical problem, conforming what they write to their purpose, sense of audience, and "their projected selves or imagined roles" (40; original emphasis). Elsewhere, they echo Ong's title as they describe this "rhetorical problem": "a rhetorical problem in particular is never merely a given: it is an elaborate construction which the writer creates in the act of composing. . . . writers themselves create the problem they solve. The reader is not the writer's only 'fiction'" (1980a:22-23; original emphasis).

Author-Audience Relationships in Business Writing

My last quotation from Flower and Hayes conveys the crux of the issue I'm addressing. Much current composition theory depends on the core notion that writers represent reality--a situational context, an author, an audience--in the text itself, and that readers construct their own representations of that text. The text becomes the only reality; all else is fictionalized and somehow put into it.[11]

But this notion depends on the prior assumption that all texts resemble published works like prose fiction narratives or expository essays susceptible to literary theoretical treatment. Throughout The Philosophy of Composition, Hirsch treats only published works (e.g., 1977:58-60, 88-89, 135, 136). Dillon analyzes only "models of excellent, complex, literary prose" "by the acclaimed masters of the essay"--Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, and Macaulay among them (1981:xv-xvi)--and like Hirsch appears to extend his analysis to all writing. Flower and Hayes also investigate mainly expository essays.[12]

The types of writing these composition theorists investigate are, because of the way in which publication works, by definition disseminated to broad, heterogeneous, audiences temporally and spatially distant from their authors.

Authors of published texts never can be quite sure whom they address; they cannot accurately know their readers' needs, beliefs, and relevant knowledge of the subject matter at hand. To hedge their bets, to cover all the bases, they must contextualize their texts. Some readers may benefit from contextualization, some may not.[13]

Conversation among intimates requires little if any contextualization, as the composition theorists I've discussed point out.[14] But speakers as well as writers must contextualize their remarks in certain situations--when they don't share much context with their hearers, for instance. The composition theorists I've discussed err when they compare extremely unsituated, published forms of writing like the expcsitory essay with conversation among intimates, then conclude that in general, writing and speaking differ markedly in the degree to which discourse participants share contextual knowledge.

A more useful approach would range both spoken and written discourse types on a continuum according to how much contextual knowledge discourse participants share. After doing so, one might see that business writers often direct their compositions to specific, denumberable audiences, the members of which have participated in a shared situational context prior to writing; business writers and readers communicate cooperatively just as do speakers and hearers in ordinary conversation. It follows that business writing students would profit from learning to make explicit the discourse strategies they employ every day in speech and then apply them to their writing tasks.

A Real-world Business Writing Sample

Exhibit One contains a real-world example--a business letter written to my wife and me--that will, I hope, clarify the preceeding discussion.

EXHIBIT ONE

Background Information

The "moving consultant" who wrote this letter has talked several times on the phone with my wife and me, its addressees. She's also met with me face-to-face at our house for an hour to estimate the cost of the move. As a result of these verbal interactions, the moving consultant shares much relevant contextual information with my wife and me about our move. She knows that:

1. We intend to move by July 1 to Champaign, Illinois.

2. We're worried about having to move a piano and a personal computer with printer. "Moving consultants" from other firms warned us that the Fourth of July weekend was a bad time to move. Other firms couldn't guarantee arrival in Champaign by the 1 July; neither can our "moving consultant." The "moving consultant" expressed several times in our conversations her apprehension that we'd pick another company instead of hers.

3. We want to save as much money as we can, but we're anxious about moving our household furnishings intact. We intend to pack our own belongings.

These are the salient points. One might easily argue that our moving consultant had the opportunity in her face-to-face meeting with me to gain much more knowledge about me that would have helped her to compose effectively. But none of this information appears in her letter. Instead, she presumes we've agreed to move with her firm when we haven't.

EXHIBIT ONE, CON'T.

The Letter

April 29, 1983

Mr. & Mrs. John Hagge
3120 - 17th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55407

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Hagge:

In order to maintain control, quality of service and closely monitor your move from start to finish, we ask that you deal with us with regard to the following:

1. Premove arrangements
2. Preliminary packing and loading dates
3. Any questions pertaining to your move with which we may be of assistance.
4. Any claims, should damage occur in the course of the move, with a description of the damaged goods.

The success of any relocation is largely dependent upon information supplied by you, the shipper, with regard to your needs and how we can meet those needs. We therefore invite your questions and inquiries. You may call myself or George Roth at (612) 484-0211 or 1-800-328-9597.

I hope you've had the time to read our "Moving Kit" as it contains information and advice which will make your planning and preparation easier.

We look forward to providing our service and wish you much happiness and good fortune at your new location.

Sincerely,

KG/pk
Moving Consultant

As the background information indicates, the letter writer knows her readers personally; she had spoken with us over the telephone several times and had talked with me for about an hour before she composed her letter. Students and business professionals to whom I've given the letter quickly notice a discontinuity between this circumstance and the gross impersonality of the letter itself, which gives no indication that it is part of a continuing dialogue between customer and sales representative.

For instance, the writer doesn't specify our planned arrival date, nor does she name the city to which we intend to move--Champaign, Illinois--although she was privy to that information. A normal conversation rarely would take place in which a speaker preferred a vague referring phrase such as "your new location" to a more precise one; furthermore, our moving consultant might have reasoned that by specifying our destination precisely, she would indicate to us that she had remembered the details of our prospective move, thus assuring us that she had our best interests at heart. She also might have addressed us as "John and Linda" instead of by our surname, since after having conversed with us several times, she might want to reinforce the fact that we "were on a first name basis" with one another.

More important, she does nothing to assuage our fears about moving expensive, easily damaged items like our personal computer and piano, although those fears figured prominently in our previous conversations and although she knew that she could make a sale by meeting our needs (she so indicated in our face-to-face chat). In other words, she failed to deploy what Brown and Levinson 1978:106ff. call positive politeness strategies (use appropriate forms of address, seek agreement by repeating items in a previous conversation, assert speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants, and so on). She also failed to mitigate the force of her requests with negative politeness strategies.

More generally stated, our moving consultant failed to apply appropriate strategies for verbal interaction, which in turn are grounded in common-sensical, practical reasoning (Brown and Levinson 1978:63-96, esp. 63-64 89-96), thus producing an ineffective letter. Instead, although I doubt she knows much literary theory, (she did tell me she majored in English education for a time in college), she composed a letter (or unwisely used an unadulterated form letter) that fictionalized both herself and her readers. She cast us in the role of "the shipper"--any shipper--paying no attention to our idiosyncratic personal requirements and questions but addressing instead what she supposed were general needs of shippers in general. And instead of remaining the cheerful, quite caring, personable young woman with whom we had spoken, in her writing she played the part of an impersonal "moving consultant."

My example letter demonstrates that writers and readers in the real world do have actual knowledge of each other, contrary to the claims made by many composition theorists. It also illustrates rather graphically, I think, what happens when an author ignores this mutual knowledge. It would seem, then, that author-audience relationships in business writing differ in at least the following ways from those in the published writing studied by Hirsch, Dillon, Flower and Hayes, and other composition theorists.

Published Prose versus Business Writing

1. Whereas writers may create expository essays or prose fiction ex nihilo and ad libitum, most if not all business writing depends on and facilitates something prior to itself--a business transaction, "the exchange of goods, money, or services for mutual benefit" (McNaughton, Hartley, and Schwartz 1970:2).[15] I write a credit collection letter, an formal report

from data, a memorandum suggesting changes in the structure of my organization, or a piece of direct mail marketing because I need to do so in the course of a certain business situation. Business situations evoke business writing; the way in which business is conducted involves written communication. The letter our moving consultant wrote my wife and me was part and parcel of a pre-established business transaction and supposedly was intended to facilitate that transaction.

To put the point another way: the purpose of a business is to stay in business; business transactions depend on decisions based on participants' mutual knowledge of the conditions of the transaction (Robinson, Morton, and Calderwood 1980:2); and this "process of converting knowledge to action is the engine that drives the [business] organization" (Zand 1981:19)--and business writing.

2. Whereas business writing is involved in human actions and often may function to elicit action from an audience, the expository essay "does not seek to engage the reader in a course of action . . . but rather in a process of reflection" (Dillon 1981:23).

3. For that reason, the speech acts that comprise a business writing text may differ significantly from those that comprise published, expository texts. As do other speech-act theorists, Bach and Harnish distinguish between several large classes of illocutionary acts.[16] A constative, for instance, "is the expression of a belief, together with the expression of an intention that the hearer form (or continue to hold) a like belief" (1979:42).[17] But directives "express the speaker's attitude toward some prospective action by the hearer and his intention that his utterance, or the attitude it expresses, be taken as a reason for the hearer's action" and commissives "express the speaker's intention and belief that his utterance

obligates him to do something" (1979:41).

4. A further linguistic feature dependent on author-audience relationships separates business writing from other compositional genres. Since business writing facilitates an encompassing business transaction, it follows that business writers and readers, unlike the most writers and readers of published prose, actually interact with one another. Because they do so, they must acknowledge the requirements of "face" in their interactions through linguistic politeness forms (Brown and Levinson 1978).

5. Whereas business writing is necessarily directed to a relatively homogeneous, small, denumerable audience--those participating in the transaction at a specific place and time--the audience for published writing theoretically is unlimited and therefore heterogeneous, vague, and indefinitely large. The business writer's audience usually can be located within definite temporal and spatial boundaries, whereas writers of published works (expository essays, say) can not necessarily predict precise locations in space or time for all their readers.

That each instance of business writing grows from some business practice, from a particular business situation, grounds this difference. Our moving consultant, for instance, directed a letter to precisely two individuals because she, my wife, and I were involved in doing business together. The business situation from which other pieces of business writing evolve defines the number of persons to whom the writing is directed: a memorandum will go to the number of persons in its "TO:" line, for instance. A direct mail piece will be directed to exactly the number of persons on the mailing list called for by the requisites of the business situation.

6. And because business writing develops from a particular situational context in which both writer and reader participate, it follows that business writers know something more about their audiences than do writers of published works; they can rely on variables in that situational context to produce meaning in their texts. Business transactions depend on reciprocity: they initiate responses that may entail more business writing, which may lead to additional responses, and so on. (A letter of inquiry requires a letter of response, which evokes an initial proposal, which requires a letter of acknowledgment, which evokes a final proposal, which evokes a letter of acceptance.) Furthermore, business writers and readers may interact in ways other than through texts. Initial business may be done by telephone; a more formal, written document follows; a meeting is held; more writing is generated from discussions there; and so on. Obviously, the very nature of published writing directed to large, amorphous audiences blocks these considerations.

7. Finally, business writers do not necessarily work in solitary confinement but collaboratively; many persons may work together to produce a business report, for instance (Anderson, Sweeney, and Williams 1981a). And roles do not need to be fashioned for business writers and their readers since they have been assigned prior to the writing by the situational contest that defines the text.

Therefore, unlike authors of the published texts valorized by composition theorists like Hirsch, Dillon, and Flower and Hayes, business writers have personal knowledge of their readers based on concrete evidence from daily interaction or based on the exchange texts. More important, this knowledge often becomes more precise over time, as it does in repeated interactions between the same speakers and hearers.[18] Clearly, for many types of

between the same speakers and hearers.[18] Clearly, for many types of compositions, especially business writing, authors do have the experience of actual audiences upon which to base their verbal choices as they compose.

The scant empirical research on practical writing supports my model. Odell and Goswami (1982) report that non-academic writers reason about stylistic choices based on their personal knowledge of readers (209) and that "many choices apparent in workers' writing (e.g., choices about the form of a request, the inclusion of elaboration) are also important in speaking" (221). Moreover, my view that business writers operate analogously to speakers in normal conversation satisfies Ockham's razor: explanatory concepts like "implied author" and "imaginary audience" disappear, and business writing is explained in terms of what we know already about the pragmatics of verbal interaction as a whole. Finally, the model makes intuitive sense to students, who have only to make explicit the discourse principles they have used in the real world all their lives and apply them to their own texts to produce better business writing.

NOTES

1 Throughout this paper, I use "author-audience" and "writer-reader" as roughly synonymous pairs.

2 "Writing calls for difficult, and often quite mysterious, skills. Except for a small corps of highly trained writers, most persons could get into written form few if any of the complicated and nuanced meanings they regularly convey orally. One reason is evident: the spoken word is part of present actuality and has its meaning established by the total situation in which it comes into being. Context for the spoken word is simply present, centered in the person speaking and the one or ones to whom he addresses himself and to whom he is related existentially in terms of the circumambient actuality. But the meaning caught in writing comes provided with no such present circumambient actuality, at least normally." (Ong 1975:10)

3 ". . . the person to whom the writer addresses himself normally is not present at all. Moreover, with certain special exceptions . . . he must not be present. I am writing a book which will be read by thousands, or, I modestly hope, by tens of thousands. So, please, get out of the room. I want to be alone. Writing normally calls for some kind of withdrawal." (Ong 1975:10)

Compare a similar sentiment by Ong in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, an anthology designed specifically for composition instructors:

> Writing depends on consciously contrived rules.
>
> Moreover, it depends on absences--which amount to the same thing as artificality. I want to write a book which will be

> read by hundreds of thousands of people. So, please, everyone leave the room. I have to be alone to communicate. Let us face the utter factitiousness and fictitiousness of such a situation, which can in no way be considered natural or even normal. (Ong 1981:40)

Martin Nystrand agrees, although he does not cite Ong: "Unlike speech, writing is private, solitary activity, whose major purpose is to communicate with someone not immediately present. . . . Talk involves constant feedback from conversants; writing involves either delayed feedback or, often, no feedback." (1982a:83-84)

4 "If the writer succeeds in writing, it is generally because he can fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers, and so on back to the dawn of written narrative. If and when he becomes truly adept, an 'original writer', he can do more than project the earlier audience, he can alter it" (Ong 1975:11).

5 Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), which Ong also cites (1975:9), is the locus for this idea (Hirsch 1977:28 n. 18).

6 Hirsch cites Grice 1968 and 1969 (Hirsch 1977:29 n. 19). Levinson well summarizes Grice's position: "communication is a complex kind of intention that is achieved or satisfied just by being recognized. In the process of communication, the 'sender's' communicative intention becomes mutual knowledge to 'sender' (S) and 'receiver' (H), i.e. S knows that H knows that S knows that H knows (and so ad infinitum) that S has this

particular intention" (1983:16; original emphasis). Mutual knowledge is discussed in Lewis 1969.

7 See Hagge 1982.

8 Compare D'Ilon 1981:48: ". . . the advice to 'consider your reader,' if take as an instruction to project an image of an actual body of people, exactly misses the point that open texts create their readers: Thoreau did not do a market survey, but brought his reader into existence, and the reader implied by Walden is a triumph of the imagination."

9 Dillon's understanding of convention throughout Constructing Texts rarely is explicitly stated. "Though it is clear from his introduction that the idea of conventions is the key to D's theory of construction, he is rarely explicit about the particular ones which he regards as central to the process. His closest approach to such explicit discussion is Chap. 1; but the conventions explained there are too broad to serve as more than the vaguest controls on text production. The following chapters are to be seen as elaborations of those broadest conventions, yet their relation to the general notion is not always clear." (Zwicky and Zwicky 1981:740). See also Hagge 1982:67 and 71.

10 At least not for the expository essay, which Dillon valorizes to the exclusion of other compositional genres; he says little about business writing or any other type of prose in Constructing Texts. Dillon does differentiate between his sense of audiences as "imagined" and Hirsch's notion of "imaginary" audiences (1981:26-28) and suggests that the audience for the expository essay is imagined but not fictional. But since Dillon argues, along with Ong and Hirsch, that writers do not address real readers, his distinction for all practical purposes

collapses.

11 I assume, as does Marilyn Cooper, "that writing is a communicative act. . . . that writers and readers operate on the basis of the same knowledge, and that the meaning of texts, as with all other communications, depends heavily on contexts." Cooper has Jay Schleusener summarize "the [opposing] position of many literary theorists:

> works of literature differ from ordinary speech because they are not tied to an immediate social context. . . . Authors and readers . . . can hardly be said to meet anywhere at all. Their only common ground is the text, and they share nothing but the words that pass between them. Meanings that might be clear enough in the social context of ordinary speech tend toward ambiguity in this circumstantial void where author and reader must do without a common world of reference and make the best of a language that cannot rely on the casual support of facts. (Cooper 1982:105-106 and 107, quoting Schleusener 1980:669-670).

12 In one assignment, they have subjects "write about your job for the readers of Seventeen magazine, 13-14 year-old girls" (1980a:23); in another, "Wendy" does a protocol on writing an expository essay about motivation (1980b:35-37). Flower, however, does consider types of writing other than published, expository prose in her composition textbook (Flower 1981). On the differences between published prose and practical writing, the broad class of compositions into which business writing falls, see Hagge 1983, esp. 3-12.

13 Steinmann 1982:310ff. shows what may happen when a writer composes for readers some of whom know the referents to which the writer refers and some of whom don't.

14 Dillon, for instance, clearly is thinking of conversation among intimates as he differentiates between Utterance and Text: "Conversation is situated in concrete terms: . . . Speaker and hearer share the same space and can refer to a whole set of perceptually common experiences. In addition, they usually have personal knowledge of each other and can take for granted many views and values they know or have reason to expect the other to hold" (1981:24).

15 Other definitions of business coincide with this one; cf. Reinecke and Schoell 1974:5-6; Hastings 1968:10; Graham 1974:17; Poe 1969:17-18.

16 See Austin 1975:148-164 and Searle 1979:1-29 for two other taxonomies of illocutionary acts.

17 Examples, Bach and Harnish 1979:42-43: (1) Assertives: "affirm, allege, assert, aver, avow, claim, declare, maintain. propound, say, state, submit"; (2) Concessives: "acknowledge, admit, agree, allow, assent, concede, concur, confess, grant, own"; (3) Dissentives: "differ, disagree, dissent, reject"; and (4) Suggestives: "conjecture, guess, hypothesize, speculate, suggest." A glance at any published, expository text will confirm that these illocutionary verbs and others like them predominate.

18 This seems be a main thrust of Bernstein's work: ". . . elaborated codes orient their users towards universalistic meanings, whereas restricted codes orient, sensitize, their users to particularistic meanings. . . .

Elaborated codes are less tied to a given or local structure. . . . Restricted codes are more tied to a local social structure. . . ." (1972:164). Hirsch errs when he states that all writing takes place in elaborated codes; business writing appears to use restricted codes.

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